



The Messianic Secret in the Fourth Gospel
On the Fundamental Importance of Mark for John's Rewriting of the Story of Jesus
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Rewriting and Reception in and of the Bible

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The Messianic Secret in the Fourth Gospel

On the Fundamental Importance of Mark for John's Rewriting of the Story of Jesus

Troels Engberg-Pedersen

The notion of ›Biblical rewriting‹ or ›rewritten Bible‹ has recently become somewhat in vogue in Biblical scholarship. In a Danish context, my former colleague, Mogens Müller, has led the way with some important studies.¹ The idea itself is stimulating in a number of respects, but it also shares with another concept in the field, ›intertextuality‹, a certain fuzziness of definition that makes it difficult to handle with any precision. In this article, I will address an issue that falls under both concepts, but I will try to make the discussion so precise that the issue can be answered with a yes or a no: did the writer of the Fourth Gospel as we have it (that is, ›John‹) know the Gospel of Mark as we have it? By ›know‹ here I mean: either from having himself read it or from having heard it read aloud to him a sufficient number of times to make him able to remember its specific shape. So, yes or no?

In putting my question as sharply as this, I am also trying to articulate a question that belongs under another very broad, scholarly topic in such a manner that there is at least a chance that the question may be answered with some certainty. That topic is ›John and the Synoptics‹, one of the most hotly debated topics within New Testament scholarship where there is no consensus and where – partly for the same reason – it is absolutely mandatory that the scholar makes his or her methodological premises clear before arguing for any specific position on the

¹ See, e.g., M. Müller, ›The New Testament gospels as Biblical rewritings. On the question of referentiality,‹ *Studia Theologica* 68 (2014): 21–40; ›Acts as Biblical Rewriting of the Gospels and Paul's Letters,‹ in *Luke's Literary Creativity* (ed. idem and J. T. Nielsen; LNTS 550; London 2016), and *Evangeliet og evangelierne. Evangelierne som bibelske genskriveringer* (*The Gospel and the Gospels. The Gospels as Biblical Rewritings*) (Copenhagen 2015).

matter.² Here I will state my own premises without being at all able to defend each of them in the proper way.³

First, as already indicated, I will be talking of both gospels ›as we have them‹, that is, as the whole texts that form part of the New Testament. The main reason here is the historical critical one that in the form in which historical criticism has set about dividing those texts into layers and then to ascribe the layers to different historical settings, this approach has reduced itself *ad absurdum*. The lack of consensus achieved in this way is so strong that it casts serious doubt over the whole approach.⁴ This is certainly not to deny that a lot of things may have happened ›before‹ the two texts as we have them, but only to insist that we cannot know with any precision or certainty and hence that we should work on those texts without presupposing or advancing any such hypothesis.

Secondly, I see the two gospels distinctly as written texts. Again, there may very well be traditions behind them that we should call ›oral‹. But I am convinced that the Gospel of Mark (the earlier one) is itself a textual fixation of whatever oral (or written, in a basically ›non-narrative‹ form) material ›Mark‹ had in front of him. Here I concur with the often expressed view that Mark invented the gospel genre in the form we have it in the four New Testament gospels: a kind of *bios* of Jesus that began with his predecessor John the Baptist (and eventually with some important embellishments before that), continued with an account of Jesus' sayings and doings in and around Palestine, and ended in Jerusalem with his death and resurrection. Mark invented this genre as a written text (the one we have), which is most clearly seen when one considers the set of themes with which he holds his narrative together: the symbolic role of geography, the different roles of Jesus' interlocutors (the crowd, the Pharisees, etc.), and much more – and indeed, as we shall see, the ›Messianic secret‹. Mark, then, is a written text. And the same goes to an even higher degree for John, who explicitly refers his readers to what has been ›written in this book‹ (20:30).⁵

Thirdly, while I am talking of the two gospel texts as we have them, and hence in principle of their ›implied‹ authors and readers, I am also allowing myself to ask of the ›real‹ author of the Fourth Gospel whether he (since it is ›John‹, of

² To my mind, the best overall statement on the issue remains J. Frey, »Das Vierte Evangelium auf dem Hintergrund der älteren Evangelientradition,« in *Johannesevangelium – Mitte oder Rand des Kanons* (ed. Th. Söding; QD 203; Freiburg i. Br. 2003), 60–118 (also in J. Frey, *Die Herrlichkeit des Gekreuzigten. Studien zu den Johanneischen Texten I* [ed. J. Schlegel; WUNT 307; Tübingen], 239–294, from which I quote), who is strong on both the history of research, the methodological issues, and the substance of John's relationship with Mark. Also excellent is U. Schnelle, »Johannes und die Synoptiker,« in *The Four Gospels 1992* (FS F. Neirynck; ed. F. van Segbroeck, Chr. M. Tuckett, G. van Belle, and J. Verheyden; BETL 100; Leuven 1992), 1799–1814.

³ All through this article, I will be relying on the fully documented, much more extensive treatment of John I have given in *John and Philosophy. A New Reading of the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford 2017).

⁴ I argue for these stark claims in *John and Philosophy* (n. 3), chapter I.

⁵ All translations are my own, unless I mention other translators (including NRSV).

whom we otherwise know nothing) knew the Gospel of Mark in the sense given above of ›knew‹. Basically, I am doing a comparison of Mark and John (in certain respects) and then asking whether the results of the comparison are such that it is probable that the Fourth Gospel could not have been written without its (real) author having known Mark.

Fourthly, in performing this act of comparison I am looking for both differences (of which there are many and very obvious ones) and similarities. It may appear that I am more concerned with similarities since these will be particularly relevant for answering my question. However, I am just as interested in the differences. This is because the whole point of the exercise is not, in fact, so much, or primarily, to answer my question either positively or negatively. That answer will be relevant to the broader interests that scholars have had when they have addressed the issue of John and the Synoptics. Here belong such questions as where the Fourth Gospel belongs within ›early Christian literature‹ as a whole; whether it reflects independent traditions about Jesus; and more of the same general kind. By contrast, my own ultimate interest in comparing Mark and John lies in getting to understand *either text* better, as it were on their own. If that can be achieved, one may well go on from there to address the broader questions, but that will constitute of distinct change of the agenda.

Fifthly, in pursuing the comparison I shall be running a distinct risk of circular reasoning. The comparison itself builds on an independent interpretation of either text, but since I will be looking for similarities in order to answer my question, there is a risk that I shall neglect some differences in order to get to the similarities. That is a risk that must be run, and I trust that my readers will be quick to point out where I may have succumbed to it. The risk is particularly strong in the case of the reading of the Fourth Gospel that I shall present. Here I will claim that the comparison with Mark may serve to bring to light an overall shape of John's whole account of Jesus that is in fact there in the Fourth Gospel itself and may be seen to be so even without any knowledge of Mark. But I also claim that its presence in John comes out much more strikingly when one compares it with Mark.

Sixthly, for the purpose of answering my more immediate question whether John knew Mark, I will focus the comparison on features of Mark that are specifically ›redactional‹.⁶ Since I am unconcerned about layers in Mark, I define ›redactional‹ here as ›special‹ to the Markan text as we have it in the sense that were those features to be taken away from our Mark, the remaining text would be an altogether different one.

⁶ For this point compare Frey, »Das Vierte Evangelium auf dem Hintergrund der älteren Evangelientradition« (n. 2), 258, who rightly refers to I. Dunderberg, *Johannes und die Synoptiker* (AASF.DS 69; Helsinki 1994) for the same point.

In what follows, I will take it as settled that the Gospel of Mark is virtually defined by the role played by the theme of the ›Messianic secret‹ that William Wrede was the first scholar to find in it.⁷ Believing this to be a ›redactional‹ theme in the sense given above, I will then show that duly inflected and transformed this theme is also central to and even definitory of John's account of Jesus. Since, as we can see from Matthew and Luke, who both knew and used Mark but did *not* make much of his theme of the ›Messianic secret‹, that theme was peculiar to Mark, it will follow that if John, too, made central use of the same motif, then John knew Mark.

1 The Messianic secret in Mark

Wrede's original account of the Messianic secret in Mark has of course not gone unchallenged. The most persuasive discussion has been the one by Heikki Räisänen.⁸ It seems to me, however, that Wrede remains right to have found two distinct ideas in Mark that *together* constitute the motif of the Messianic secret. Here is Wrede's own succinct statement of the two ideas:

We find in Mark two ideas:

- 1) As long as he is on earth, Jesus keeps his messiahship a secret.
- 2) To the disciples he does admittedly reveal himself in contrast to the people, but to them too he remains incomprehensible in his revelations for the time being.

Behind both ideas, which to a large extent overlap, lies the same belief that real knowledge of what Jesus is only begins with his resurrection. This idea of the secret Messiahship extends significantly in Mark. It dominates many sayings of Jesus, numerous miracle stories, and the entire course of the narrative as a whole.⁹

The combination of these two ideas is spelled out in Mark in the following way. Throughout the gospel Jesus engages with different groups of people: the Jewish crowd, the disciples, and his various opponents, primarily the Pharisees, who are later (in Jerusalem) joined by the high priests. In addition, Jesus from time to time engages directly with the demons he is banishing from people afflicted with them. The Messianic secret proper concerns Jesus' identity as the Messiah. Of the four groups of characters, Jesus' opponents are never (until at the very end) explicitly told by Jesus that he is the Messiah, nor do they ever understand and accept it. They do recognize from early on (Mk 2:1–3:6) that Jesus behaves in ways that go against normal Jewish practice and decide for that reason to have him killed (3:6). It is only at the end of this development, in Jesus' appearance

⁷ W. Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien. Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums* (Göttingen 1901).

⁸ H. Räisänen, *The Messianic Secret in Mark* (Edinburgh 1990).

⁹ Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis* (n. 7), 114. My own translation with input from W. Wrede, *The Messianic Secret* (tr. J. C. G. Greig; Cambridge 1971).

before the Jewish Synedrium (14:53–65), that the high priest explicitly asks Jesus whether he is ›the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One‹ (14:61, NRSV). And here, at this very high point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus at long last answers: ›I am; and ›you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power«, and ›coming with the clouds of heaven.‹« (14:62, NRSV) – and then the high priest decides that they have all the evidence they need to have Jesus convicted of blasphemy! In short, even though the Messianic secret is finally lifted in relation to Jesus' opponents, they do not understand it at all.

At the other end of the span from Jesus' opponents to his followers, his disciples, there is a development that constitutes one backbone of the Gospel as a whole. To begin with (Mk 4), although Jesus fully explains to the disciples in private (4:34) everything he has said to the crowd in parables (4:33), the disciples nevertheless remain in the dark about who Jesus is (›Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?‹, 4:41, NRSV). And so they continue throughout the first half of the Gospel, e. g. in 8:17 (›Do you still not perceive or understand?‹, NRSV) and 8:21 (›Do you not yet understand?‹, NRSV). With Peter's confession, however, in 8:29 (›You are the Messiah‹, NRSV), they do reach the proper understanding of Jesus – but only in such a manner that Mark goes out of his way in the second half of his text to show that in spite of everything the disciples did *not* understand that Jesus was a Messiah who was meant to die on the cross. That is what is partly shown in Jesus' three passions predictions as he and the disciples are moving towards Jerusalem (8:31–33; 9:31–32; 10:32–34). In the case of the disciples, Jesus means them to understand his Messianic identity, and they half do, but no more than that.

In the middle of the span is the crowd, which to begin with is very favourable towards Jesus due to his healings and the like and who do have a sense that there is something special about him (already at his first public appearance in Kapernaum: ›What is this? A new teaching – with authority!‹, 1:27, NRSV). Still, in spite of the fact that the crowd also greets Jesus upon his entry into Jerusalem as inaugurating ›the coming kingdom of our ancestor David‹ (11:10, NRSV), they end up joining Jesus' direct opponents, the high priests, in asking Pilate to release Barabbas so that Jesus may be crucified (15:11, 13). Basically, therefore, none of the three ordinary human groups – the opponents, the disciples, and the crowd – fully recognize who Jesus is.

It is different, however, with those who represent the ›super-human‹ level that is present all through. The demons who are involved in Jesus' healings of people among the crowd do know his identity as indicated already in the first scene at Kapernaum (›I know who you are, the Holy One of God‹, 1:24, NRSV). And it is to them that Jesus gives the instruction not to reveal his identity, but to keep it a secret: ›and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him‹, 1:34; cf. 3:11–12. What this shows is that although nobody at the human level fully recognized who Jesus was (the ›Messiah‹, the ›Holy One of God‹, the ›Son

of the Blessed One»), he *was* these things all the time and was recognized as such by those who had access to this ›super-human‹ level.

It is well known that Mark highlights this level at three points during his Gospel. At his baptism (1:9–11), God himself makes it clear – to Jesus himself *and* the reader! – when he tells Jesus: ›You are my Son, the Beloved‹ (1:11). In the transfiguration scene (9:2–10), God once more makes it clear – and now to the three disciples who were present on the mountain (and of course to the reader) – when he tells the three disciples: ›This is my Son, the Beloved‹ (9:7, NRSV). Finally, at Jesus' death, a Roman centurion makes it clear when he says of Jesus: ›Truly this man was God's Son‹ (15:39, NRSV). Three times, then, it is made wholly clear that Jesus *was* the Messiah all through his life and death, only this was not realized or understood by any of the three groups of ordinary human beings with whom he interacted: certainly not – rather, quite the opposite – by his direct opponents; in fact not – in spite of everything – by the crowd; and only half by his direct followers, who at one point (in Peter's confession, 8:29) did come to realize *half* of what Jesus was.

Two questions, then: why did Mark's Jesus *mean* to keep his identity a secret – even to such an extent that he spoke in parables to the crowd in order that they should *not* understand him (4:11–12)?¹⁰ And when was the secret lifted? Wrede himself developed a complicated answer to the first question in terms of the way the historical Jesus had in fact been understood. Here it will suffice to say that Mark apparently wished to tell his reader something about the reactions to Jesus of three groups: his direct opponents at one end of the span, his direct followers at the other end, and a group of ›non-committed‹, but initially positive people in between. If in the end the latter did *not* understand who Jesus was or what he was saying, then that ›must have‹ been intended by Jesus – if Jesus in fact was the person whom Mark describes him as being.

Summarizing, we may say the following of Mark's account of Jesus' *presentation* to the various groups of his own identity (which is made wholly clear to the reader all through the book) and of their *understanding* of it. Jesus' Messianic identity is not kept a secret to his direct opponents, but only revealed to them at the very end. This, however, is wholly immaterial since all through they do not understand it *at all*. Jesus' Messianic identity *is* intimated to the disciples, who *should* have seen; and they in fact do manage to see half of it. Nevertheless, the basic point about them is that in the end they do not see it either. Finally, the Messianic identity is distinctly *kept* a secret to the crowd – corresponding to the fact that they never see it fully and in the end side with the opponents.

When, then, was the secret lifted in the sense that the disciples, at least, came to see *fully* who Jesus was? The answer is given at the end of the transfigura-

¹⁰ Here I am on purpose connecting Mark's ›parable theory‹ with the motif of the Messianic secret.

tion scene, as Wrede clearly saw: ›As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.‹ (9:9, NRSV). That is, Jesus' true identity as it had been revealed to the three chosen disciples on the mountain *must remain a secret until after his resurrection*. Again, we may ask why. And again the answer will be that Jesus' true identity as a *Messiah who was also (going to be) crucified* was not seen, *could* not be seen and was not even *meant* to be seen until after his resurrection. Why – if that *was* Jesus' true identity – was it not *meant* to be seen before that moment? Again the answer is: *because* it *was* not and *could* not be seen before then.

Thus understood, the motif of the Messianic secret that Wrede discovered in Mark pinpoints the following ideas:

- Jesus *was* the Messiah (even though he was not understood that way),
- He was a Messiah to be crucified,
- This idea was impossible to understand while Jesus was alive,
- Jesus was a Messiah to be crucified *and then resurrected*,
- It was Jesus' being resurrected that gave *meaning* to the idea that he was a Messiah to be crucified and hence made it possible to understand that idea.

This set of ideas is brought to expression in Mark by means of the secrecy motif. Jesus was ..., but was not understood as ...: *ergo*, he was not *meant* to be understood. Only after his resurrection was the secret lifted: *ergo*, only then was it *meant* to be lifted. Jesus' true identity as a Messiah to be crucified was not and could not be seen while those things happened. It was *shown* to be *meant* by God through the resurrection – which also showed, of course, that Jesus was a Messiah to be crucified *and* resurrected. Before that last event Jesus' full identity was meant to be kept a secret.

On this understanding, there is no need to go back with Wrede to any conjectural historical situations and layers behind Mark. Rather, it makes excellent sense to claim that Mark has pinpointed a feature in the understanding of Jesus Christ – namely, the fact that he was crucified – that cries out for explanation. And his answer is that Jesus Christ *had* to die on the cross. That was part of the plan even though it could not be understood at the time. However, that it was this was *shown* at the resurrection. Then Jesus' full identity *could* be understood – and *was* understood.

For the sake of clarity it is worth stressing that Mark employs the secrecy motif not just in relation to the crowd, but also to everybody else, including the disciples (at 9:9). In the former case the motif of secrecy is invoked by Jesus whenever characters (the demons) who represent the ›super-human‹ level of things make his identity known. In the latter case the motif of secrecy is invoked by Jesus when the three disciples on the mountain have been given a glimpse of the ›super-human‹ level. Thus, the secrecy motif highlights and *combines* these

two themes: exactly who Jesus *was* (all through the story of his life on earth, that is, his full identity); and that he was not understood by *anybody* at the time to be just that.

2 The ›Messianic secret‹ in John

Turning now to John we should immediately point to two major differences from Mark. First on secrecy. In John there is absolutely no idea that Jesus wanted to keep his true identity a secret. Quite to the contrary, when the first disciples greet Jesus in the second half of John 1 (1:35–51) by calling him a number of reasonably appropriate ›names‹ (›the Messiah‹, 1:41; ›him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote‹, 1:45, NRSV; ›the Son of God‹ and ›the King of Israel‹, 1:49), they are explicitly told that they will see ›greater things than these‹ (1:50), in particular things happening to the Son of Man (1:51, see again 6:62). Similarly, in the Farewell Discourse of 13:31–17:26 the disciples are explicitly told what is going to happen to Jesus, once again focusing on his return to God (cf. 16:28). Nothing is kept a secret here on Jesus' side. On the contrary, he repeatedly refers explicitly to his destiny and consequently to his full identity.

The same is true in relation to the crowd of Jews and others who get into contact with Jesus and are shown what he is capable of doing. To the Samaritan woman, who begins to speak of ›the Messiah‹ (4:25), Jesus explicitly states: ›I am he, the one who is speaking to you‹ (4:26). And the fact that Jesus' miracles are called ›signs‹ of course means that they are meant to point to the person who has performed them and who he is. In fact, bringing that out is the whole theme of John 9, in which the man born blind who has then been healed by Jesus gradually by his own means comes to the conclusion that ›this man‹ must be ›from God‹ (9:33). For later purposes, however, it is worth noting that he needs Jesus' help to take the final step of realizing that Jesus is even more than that, namely (once again), ›the Son of Man‹ (9:35–38). There is no whisper of secrecy here. On the contrary, from Jesus' side the ordinary human beings with whom he gets into contact are *meant* to understand who he fully is. (Only, as we will see, they do not in fact do so.)

Finally, Jesus does nothing whatever to hide his identity from those among the Jews who become his direct opponents. On the contrary, his claim that ›The Father and I are one‹ (10:30, NRSV) made in direct dialogue with those Jews (10:22–39) comes as only one of several equally strong and direct claims throughout the confrontation with ›the Jews‹ in John 5–10. For instance, when ›the Jews‹ decide that Jesus must be killed ›because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God‹ (5:18, NRSV), the whole brunt of Jesus' response in the following speech (5:19–47) is that they are exactly right: he *is* equal to God!

The first difference, then, from Mark is that there is absolutely no secrecy in John concerning Jesus' full identity. On the contrary, Jesus constantly trumpets it forth.¹¹ Here one might also mention a difference between Mark and John in their account of Jesus' baptism. In Mark it constitutes one of the three pillars of his Gospel that indicate Jesus' true identity while the same is kept a secret at the human level. Correspondingly, what happens in the baptism scene in Mark (1:9–11) takes place exclusively between Jesus and God. *Jesus* ›saw‹ the spirit descending (1:10), *Jesus* heard a voice from heaven saying ›You are my Son, the Beloved‹ (1:11). Consider then John. Here (1:29–34) the whole scene is packed into the witness of John the Baptist. *He* saw and heard – and he is now bearing *witness* to those events, in order that Jesus ›might be revealed to Israel‹ (1:31, NRSV). Moreover, John makes the Baptist *repeat* that witness a little later (3:25–36) if anybody should have missed it. In John, Jesus' identity is made wholly public by the Baptist to anybody who cares to listen.

The second difference from Mark lies in the fact that in John the key point about Jesus' identity is not (just) that he is the ›Messiah‹, but something more. We have already noticed this in connection with 1:35–51, where Jesus explicitly points beyond Nathanael's confession of him as ›the Son of God‹ and ›the King of Israel‹ (1:49). In the same vein, once Jesus has declared to the Samaritan woman that he himself is the ›Messiah‹ of whom she has been speaking, she is described as *pondering* ›Might he perhaps be the Christ?‹ (4:29), and as the story continues, her fellow Samaritans are described (4:39–42) as rejecting *her* witness to Jesus, settling instead – once they have themselves been together with Jesus for a couple of days – on the much more appropriate view that ›this man is truly the Saviour of the world‹ (4:42). All through the Fourth Gospel it is clear that while ›Messiah‹ and ›Christ‹ are appropriate enough as titles for who Jesus is, they are also insufficient: he is even more than that, primarily the ›only Son of God‹ (cf. 1:14, 18), ›Son of the Father‹ (passim), and the like.¹²

With these two differences from Mark in place we may immediately conclude that there is no *secret* in John that is *Messianic*. In other words, there is no ›Messianic secret‹ in John. Why, then, the title of this article?

The answer is: because the other side of the motif of the Messianic secret in Mark, namely, the lack of understanding on the part of the crowd, the Jewish opponents, *and* the disciples is very much in place in John too, indeed, one may

¹¹ Compare Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis* (n. 7), 180: »What is the activity and the speech of the Johannine Christ if not a continuous revelation? Over all his speeches one might place as a motto the word he says to the high priest: ›I have spoken openly to the world ... I have said nothing in secret‹ (18:20).«

¹² Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis* (n. 7), 179 f. rightly saw this: »The view of Jesus in the Gospel of John is not characterized by the concept of the Messiah. (...) The only begotten Son of God, the *Logos*, the Light of the World, the Bread of Life, the bringer of Truth, these are predicates (...)«

well say that this theme is given even stronger emphasis than in Mark. Moreover, John also spells out even more strongly than Mark the part of this theme that states that the lack of full understanding could only be lifted – but then definitely also *will* be lifted – after Jesus' resurrection. Let us consider these two similarities with Mark: the lack of full understanding among all while Jesus was alive; and the point about when this lack of understanding was lifted.

First on the lack of full understanding. We have already seen that full understanding of Jesus, according to John, involves the point about the ›Son of Man‹ returning to God (cf. 6:62 and 16:28). This means that recognition of Jesus as the ›Messiah‹ or other ›lesser‹ titles is insufficient. The disciples of 1:35–51 have not yet reached the ultimate understanding for which Thomas' confession in 20:28 – nota bene: made *after* Jesus' resurrection – stands out as the crucial example: ›My Lord and my God!‹ (NRSV). Nicodemus in John 3 knows that Jesus is a ›teacher who has come from God‹ (3:2, NRSV), but that is clearly insufficient, too, as is shown by the following conversation. Similarly, the man born blind in John 9 himself reaches the conclusion that Jesus comes ›from God‹ in a heightened sense, but we saw that he needs Jesus' help to get from there to the full understanding. Again, the Samaritan woman only half-saw that Jesus was the ›Messiah‹ and in itself that was not enough. (On her compatriots see further below.) What then about Martha in John 11? Her confession sounds splendid: ›Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the son of God, the one coming into the world‹ (11:27). But two things qualify this insight. First, Martha's declaration does not in fact answer Jesus' question since he had asked about a very specific point about life and death (11:25–26) that follows from his claim that he himself is ›the resurrection and the life‹ (11:25, NRSV). Secondly, it is shown later in the story (11:39–40) that Martha precisely did *not* understand Jesus' claim to be ›the resurrection and the life‹. Thus Martha did not either grasp fully who Jesus was.¹³ In fact, although the titles she gives in 11:27 are in a way all right, they do not necessarily have the explicit ›intension‹ (in the philosophical sense of this) that John puts into them. For instance, ›the son of God‹ *need* not mean ›the *only* Son of God‹.

¹³ This is one of the most contended issues in Johannine scholarship. On the positive side, compare Michael Theobald's almost ecstatic celebration of the »erleuchteter Glaube, gesättigt durch Erfahrung, der sich in dem Bekenntnissatz ausspricht: ›Du bist der Heilige Gottes!‹« M. Theobald, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes: Kapitel 1–12* (Regensburger Neues Testament; Regensburg 2009), 495 (his italics). On the sceptical side, compare Nils Dahl: »The reader has to understand that her declaration, ›I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day‹ was both correct and inadequate, *as was her later confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God* (11:21–27, and see vv. 39–40).« N. A. Dahl, »›Do not wonder!‹ John 5:28–29 and Johannine Eschatology Once More,« in *The Conversation Continues. Studies in Paul and John in Honor of J. L. Martyn*, (ed. R. T. Fortna and B. R. Gaventa; Nashville 1990), 322–336, 329 (my italics). Both Theobald and Dahl of course are and were superb scholars. For further discussion of the issue see *John and Philosophy* (n. 3), chapters VIII and XII.

We should conclude that none of the individuals with whom Jesus gets into contact understands his identity to its full extent. There are two exceptions to this rule. One is John the Baptist, but his actual understanding is easily explained by the role he has been given in John of bearing witness to Jesus. The Baptist stands somewhat apart. After all, he has been explicitly told by God (1:33). The other exception is the Samaritan men of 4:39–42, but that exception, too, can be explained. It seems likely (not least in the light of the very complicated verses, 4:31–38, that appear to be speaking of the mission after Jesus' death) that the Samaritan men are meant to represent those non-Jews who *after* Jesus' death obtained a full understanding of who Jesus was and hence became members of the newly founded ›church‹. Their almost ›proleptic‹ appearance in 4:39–42 should not throw doubt on the general rule that according to John, nobody fully grasped who Jesus was until after his death and resurrection.

That this also holds of the disciples is shown with great clarity by the Farewell Discourse (13:13–17:26). In two of its four sections, (i) 13:36–14:31 and (iii) 16:16–33, Jesus announces to the disciples that he is about to depart and comforts them by explaining that they will receive the ›paraclete‹-*pneuma* as a substitute for Jesus himself. But John also makes it very clear that the disciples do not fully understand what Jesus is talking about. That, for instance, is the overall theme of the first part of section i (13:36–14:11), and it similarly constitutes *the* theme of section iii, in which Jesus returns to the overall line of thought of section i.¹⁴ This comes out very clearly in the latter half of that section (16:25–33). Here is Jesus: ›I have said these things to you in figures of speech (ἐν παροιμίαις). The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures (ἐν παροιμίαις), but will tell you plainly (παρρησίᾳ) of the Father‹ (16:25, NRSV). Interesting! Has Jesus then been speaking in a veiled form to them? In fact not. But *they* have not been able to *understand* what he has been saying clearly enough. However, a day will come when they will ask (God) in Jesus' name (16:26a) and God will give them what they have asked for, not through Jesus' intervention (16:26b), but directly since ›the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and *have believed* that I came from God‹ (16:27, NRSV). So, *have* they after all already believed in Jesus in the proper way? No, for Jesus goes immediately on to tell them what it is one must believe: ›I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father‹ (16:28, NRSV). And when the disciples then happily exclaim ›Yes, now you are speaking plainly (παρρησίᾳ), not in any figure of speech (παροιμίαν)!‹ (16:29, NRSV) and continue saying ›Now we know ...; by this we believe that you came from God‹ (16:30, NRSV), they *eo ipso* betray that they do *not*, in fact, understand everything. For they only assert the first half of 16:28: that Jesus has *come from* God, not that he is return-

¹⁴ By contrast, in section ii (15:1–16:14), as I read it, Jesus is looking forward to the situation of the disciples once Jesus *has* left them. On all this, see *John and Philosophy* (n. 3), chapter IX.

ing to him. What they do understand is of course quite important; in fact, it is sufficient for Jesus to go on in section *iv* (John 17) of the Farewell Discourse to pray to God that he may send them the ›paraclete‹-*pneuma* since ›they ... know in truth that I came from you‹ – once again, only the first half of the full truth – ›and they have believed that you sent me‹ (17:8, NRSV). Still, Jesus does not say that they know the full truth *including* the fact that he is about to return to God in his resurrection.

We should conclude that even the disciples do not, according to John, reach a full grasp of Jesus' identity while he is still with them on earth. In particular, they do not understand that Jesus will die and be resurrected, thereby returning to God.

The second similarity with Mark pertained to the question when this lack of full understanding will finally be lifted. That is a question for which John develops a comprehensively elaborate answer. It will happen once people who have initially ›come to believe in‹ Jesus (in some form or other – compare all the *less* than full titles for Jesus that we have encountered) will receive the (›paraclete‹-) *pneuma*. That is the theme of the conversation with Nicodemus in John 3, where it is made quite clear that one needs to be ›(re)born‹ (through baptism) of ›water and *pneuma*‹ (3:5) before one can ›see‹ (3:3) and ›enter‹ (3:5) the kingdom of God. That this presupposes the full understanding of Jesus is made clear if we combine two central passages from John 6 and 7 that address the reception of the *pneuma* by believers once Jesus has died and its effect on them. In 7:33–36 Jesus declares to the Jews in Jerusalem what he will take up again with the disciples in the Farewell Discourse: ›I will be with you a little while longer, and then I am going to him who sent me‹ (7:33, NRSV). The Jews of course do not understand this and speculate that he may ›intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks‹ (!, 7:35, NRSV). They are just baffled (7:36). Next, however Jesus declares:¹⁵ ›Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believe in me drink‹ (7:37–38) and John immediately explains that Jesus was here referring to the *pneuma*: ›Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified‹ (7:39, NRSV). Clearly, there are two levels of understanding Jesus in John: coming to believe in Jesus and – once one *has* come to believe in him *and* once the *pneuma* has become available – understanding him fully by drinking the *pneuma*. As is shown by John 6, drinking the *pneuma* (and eating Jesus, the ›bread of life‹) occurs at the Eucharist once believers have seen ›the Son of Man ascending to where he was before‹ (6:62, NRSV). For: ›It is the spirit (*pneuma*) that gives life; the flesh is useless‹ (6:63, NRSV).

¹⁵ This happens on a slightly later occasion. But John is generally more interested in thematic connections than in changes of time and place.

In this way John operates with two levels of understanding Jesus. One is available as a possibility before Jesus' death and resurrection. It consists in ›believing in Jesus‹ as this or that, but not as one who will return to God. The other is only available after Jesus' death and resurrection. It presupposes reception of the (›paraclete(-)‹) *pneuma* that Jesus has sent as a substitute for himself after his death and resurrection, and it consists in a full grasp of Jesus *as* having precisely returned to God after his death. It is also this specific level of understanding that makes it possible for such fully knowing believers to ›see and enter the kingdom of God‹ (at their own resurrection, that is).

We should conclude that John shares with Mark the fundamentally important idea that a full grasp of Jesus' identity only became available after Jesus' death *and resurrection*. In Mark this idea is stated in the crucially important verse 9:9 that Wrede highlighted. In John the idea is spelled out in John 3, 6, and 7, but then turned into a centrepiece of the Farewell Discourse (John 13–17).

3 Summary and conclusion

We have seen that the theme of the Messianic secrecy in Mark serves the purpose of focusing the text on two themes – who Jesus is (his identity) and who gets to understand this and when – that cannot be torn apart, but rather combine to constitute the logical backbone of the text as a whole. In John we have found that the central focus is not on the Messiah, but rather on the Son of Man, the only Son of God. Also, there is no secrecy in John from Jesus' side. On the contrary, Jesus constantly trumpets forth to anybody concerned who he genuinely is. Here the best image for what John is doing is to say that he has turned Mark inside out. What is a secret in Mark becomes public knowledge in John. *Only*, it is not *understood*. It is important to see here that in saying that John has turned Mark ›inside out‹ on secrecy, I am not just pointing to a difference between the two. On the contrary, there is a very close similarity *within* the difference. This lies in the fact that the *effect* of either keeping secret or trumpeting forth is exactly the same in both gospels: Jesus' true identity is not understood.

That, then, is the other side of John's overall picture, and here he takes over completely the central Markan point that Jesus' full identity *was* not and *could* not be understood until after his death and resurrection. Even more, John elaborates this point into making it the centrepiece of the Farewell Discourse that he gave to Jesus at his last meal with his disciples.

Then the conclusion. There can be no doubt that the motif of the Messianic secret is ›redactional‹ in Mark in the sense from which we began. Mark has invented and developed this motif into constituting the core set of ideas (the *Grundgerüst*) of his text. One might of course always claim that something like it might have been present in Mark's ›tradition‹. However, from a methodological

point of view such a claim would be quite empty. And the unlikelihood that it might be true is emphasized by the fact that both Matthew and Luke, who did know Mark, were sufficiently unimpressed by its presence in Mark for them to neglect it in the most glaring form of negligence: they both from time to time took over from Mark some of the statements he had used to present the motif (e. g. Mt 12:16 vis-à-vis Mk 3:12 and Lk 4:41 vis-à-vis Mk 1:34) – but nevertheless left the whole motif aside without investing in it at all.

John did quite the opposite. He not only saw and understood the motif, but also took it over and developed it in striking ways that both fit his own overall conception of Jesus and are also so close, logically, to Mark's original conception that he cannot have written like that without having had an extensive knowledge of the written Mark, as we have him. Here the point holds that just as it is extremely unlikely that John should have reinvented the gospel genre of the Markan type on the presupposition that he had no knowledge of the latter, so it is extremely unlikely that he should have developed the motif of the ›hiddenness of the only Son of God‹ without actually knowing Mark's motif of the Messianic secret.¹⁶ In John, the Markan motif of the Messianic secret *became* the motif of the hiddenness of the only Son of God.

At the same time – this is a point brought out exceedingly well by Jörg Frey¹⁷ – John's reemployment of the Markan motif helps us to see the very sharply profiled way in which John handled the material he had inherited. On the basis of an analysis of a range of material in Mark and John that has nothing to do with the Messianic secret, Frey rightly speaks of a ›tiefgreifende Transformation«¹⁸ and concludes as follows: »Der vierte Evangelist ist alles andere als ein bloßer Kompilator!«¹⁹ Seen from my own perspective, that is also the most important result of the comparison of Mark and John we have performed in this article. It shows us very clearly how John has developed and transformed a motif that he took over from Mark so as to make it conform to a whole range of themes that define his own text: the focus on Jesus' divine identity, on the extent to which – and by whom – this was understood, on the role of the *pneuma* in generating such an understanding, and on the role of the *pneuma*-generated understanding for salvation in the form of eternal life in heaven.²⁰ John's picture of the Jesus story and

¹⁶ For the gospel argument, see Schnelle, »Johannes und die Synoptiker« (n. 2), 1801–1805, including this on page 1801: »Historisch muss es als unwahrscheinlich gelten, dass ca. 30 Jahre nach der Schaffung der Gattung Evangelium und ca. 10–20 Jahre nach ihrer Rezeption durch Matthäus und Lukas völlig unabhängig von Markus innerhalb des Urchristentums ein zweiter Theologe dieselbe Gattung schuf.« See also Frey, »Das Vierte Evangelium auf dem Hintergrund der älteren Evangelientradition« (n. 2), 264.

¹⁷ Ibid., 281–290.

¹⁸ Ibid., 281.

¹⁹ Ibid., 290.

²⁰ For the last theme, in particular, see *John and Philosophy* passim and chapter XII. John's emphasis on understanding does not lead to anything like a ›realized eschatology«. On the con-

its meaning for human beings is very much his own. But it is inconceivable unless seen as reflecting a knowledge of Mark's motif of the Messianic secret. It turns the Markan secrecy motif inside out. Here, then, we do have a case of ›rewritten Bible‹ in the most direct form to be imagined. The best way to describe this connection between the two writers is again Wrede's: »Man betrachte Markus durch ein starkes Vergrößerungsglas, und man hat etwa eine Schriftstellerei, wie sie Johannes zeigt.«²¹

trary, the role of the *pneuma* for understanding also ties in with a future, physical resurrection of human beings into heaven.

²¹ »If one looks at Mark through a strong magnifying glass, one will get something like a type of writing shown by John.« Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis* (n. 7), 145.